

VZCZCXRO9742
RR RUEHSK
DE RUEHVL #0228/01 1171055
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 271055Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3447
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0073
RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KYIV 0751
RUEHSK/AMEMBASSY MINSK
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 2684
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0302
RUEHTL/AMEMBASSY TALLINN 7219
RUEHSI/AMEMBASSY TBILISI 0086
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS BE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1585

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 VILNIUS 000228

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/NB and H

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OREP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [BO](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: LITHUANIA TELLS CODEL BERKLEY: RELY ON US IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: VILNIUS 180

11. Summary: Political leaders assured CODEL Berkley on its visit to Vilnius April 15-17 that the GOL would not falter in its efforts in Afghanistan despite the country's deteriorating budget situation. They also promised -- again -- to move forward swiftly on resolving longstanding problems with Jewish property restitution and protection of a historic Jewish cemetery site in Vilnius. On the economy and the short-term outlook for energy independence, the Lithuanians' statements were more pessimistic. They called for the West to do more to support and protect Georgia and Ukraine, and expressed concern that profit motives could override the West's political will in relations with Russia. End summary.

12. During two days of meetings in Vilnius en route to Prague for the Trans-Atlantic Legislators' Dialogue, the seven-member CODEL led by Rep. Shelley Berkley discussed the world financial crisis, relations with Russia and other neighbors, energy independence, Jewish property restitution and other issues with President Valdas Adamkus, Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, parliamentary Speaker Arunas Valinskas and other legislators, the chief economist of Lithuania's largest commercial bank and leaders of the Lithuanian Jewish community. Several Belarusian opposition leaders traveled to Vilnius to meet with the delegation. CODEL Berkley also included Representatives John Carter, Steve Cohen, Virginia Foxx, Phil Gingrey, Paul Kanjorski, and Ron Klein.

13. President Adamkus, who spent most of his adult life as an American citizen, told the delegation Lithuania owed a deep debt to the United States for not abandoning it during the Soviet occupation. Independence might not have been achieved in 1990 "if not for the support of the United States during the dark years.... That provided the spirit needed here to resist." Prime Minister Kubilius also said Lithuania remained grateful for American support in those years, and called the United States "a very important strategic partner."

Afghanistan: Expensive, but worth it

14. All Lithuanian officials told the delegation members that Lithuania would stand with the United States and NATO and uphold its commitments in Afghanistan, where it leads a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Ghor Province. "We are cutting our budget expenditures," Kubilius said. "But for our military mission in Afghanistan, we are not cutting and are trying to increase it." Parliamentarian Juozas Olekas, who served as defense minister in the government that left office late last year, said Lithuania could use help: "If we could get any additional funding for civilian projects in Ghor Province, that would be great."

Economy: No guarantee efforts will succeed

15. President Adamkus told the delegation that "this is the critical year" for the world economy and expressed guarded optimism about Lithuania's economic plight. PM Kubilius said the GOL continues to take unpopular but necessary steps to deal with a downward slide largely beyond its control. "Sixty percent of our economy and GDP are based on exports. We are very dependent on what happens in the EU, Russia and other places. Now the economy is going down and we have no choice but to cut all expenditures. It's not very popular and not very easy." The GOL has announced its second round of budget cuts already this year.

16. Gitanas Nauseda, chief economist for SEB Bank, Lithuania's largest commercial bank, praised the government's actions to address the economic crisis and said the difficulty in borrowing left it no choice but to cut costs. But he also said he thought the GOL was "really in deep trouble" and would have no choice but to borrow from the IMF by summer. Although the Lithuanian banking system is sound, he said, "the main problems are in the real economy: exports and export competitiveness." He forecast the start of real recovery in western Europe for 2010, but not until a year later in Lithuania.

Russia and the other neighbors

17. President Adamkus told the Codel that leaders of other NATO and
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EU countries have told him that Lithuania should refrain from causing friction with Russia. But Lithuania, he said, maintains the best business and neighborly relations it can with Russia. "It's not one of the friendliest and warmest relations, but I'd call it respectful." After referring to the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, PM Kubilius said Lithuania wanted to join with the United States and EU "to work with Russia to help avoid the mistakes they still sometimes make."

18. Speaker Valinskas and other members of the Seimas (parliament) spoke more bluntly about their concerns that the EU was eager to get back to doing business with Russia despite Russia's failure to heed its commitment to withdraw to the positions it held before its invasion of Georgia last summer. Economic interests are trumping political ones, Valinskas said, so that "now there is no certainty that in the future Russian tanks won't enter Tbilisi." In a clear reference to Russia, Seimas foreign-affairs committee member Petras Austrevicius warned that the Western alliances "must not leave eastern Europe drifting by itself, or it will be captured immediately by some big, never-sleeping country." Olekas, the former defense minister, was supported by vigorous nods from colleagues when he said Lithuania would favor expansion of NATO to include Georgia and -- if it wished to join -- Ukraine as well.

Energy independence

19. Discussing energy, President Adamkus said Lithuania was like "an isolated island dependent on Russia," from which it gets all of its natural gas and most of its oil. The slated closure of the Ignalina nuclear-power plant (NPP) at the end of this year will only exacerbate that situation. President Adamkus said he hoped construction would start by the end of 2010 on a state-of-the-art replacement NPP that would serve not only Lithuania but Poland as well. He also said he had reached political agreement with the prime minister of Sweden on an undersea electrical cable, though technical details remained to be resolved. Valinskas said Lithuania had "very little maneuverability" on energy because of its reliance on Russia for gas and oil and the impending Ignalina closure. PM Kubilius admitted that "we are worried a little bit about energy supplies from Russia." Nauseda, the banker, said Lithuania was in a

difficult position. "Russia can take aggressive measures not through political or military policies, but through economic policies." He also pointed out that construction of a new NPP would take at least a decade and "it's not sure that they'll build such a plant at all."

Belarus

¶10. Six leaders from Belarus' civil society and democratic opposition traveled to Vilnius to meet with the delegation at a working lunch hosted by Embassy Minsk April 16: former political prisoner Alyaksandr Kazulin, political party leaders Anatol Lyabedzka, Vintsuk Vyachorka, and Vital Rymasheuski, For Freedom movement deputy chair Viktor Karniyenka, and Belarusian Association of Journalists head Zhanna Litvina. (Youth leader Artur Finkevich was stopped by Belarusian border guards and not allowed to leave the country, though he had a valid visa for Lithuania.) Coincidentally, as the discussion took place, Czech Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg was delivering an invitation to Belarusian President Lukashenka to attend the EU's Eastern Partnership summit scheduled for May 7. The Belarusians had that gesture in mind as they criticized of the nature of dialogue between the EU and the Government of Belarus (GOB), saying it did nothing but give legitimacy to the Lukashenka regime.

¶11. They said the EU should demand concrete and irreversible progress on human rights, including freedom of the press, freedom of association, better elections and a less restrictive legal environment in Belarus before agreeing to talk with Lukashenka. The Belarusians expressed desire for a common U.S.-EU stance on Belarus, with the USG influencing the Europeans. Belarusian Christian Democracy Party co-chair Vital Rymasheuski suggested that the current economic situation provided an opportunity for Western countries to offer financial assistance to the GOB in exchange for increased democracy and freedoms in Belarus; his views were not shared by his colleagues. In general, the Belarusian participants praised USG efforts in Belarus, and asked that assistance to

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independent media and the Embassy's small grants program continue. Rep. Berkley confirmed to the Belarusians that Congress and the new administration were firmly committed to democracy and human rights, and offered to take up the issue of Belarus with EU interlocutors.

Jewish issues: restitution and cemetery

¶12. Delegation members urged GOL officials to move swiftly to resolve the long-standing problem of restitution for Jewish communal property seized by the Nazi and Soviet occupiers. Speaker Valinskas said the issue had been complicated by squabbling among Jewish groups in Lithuania. "Please do something to make sure there is one person we can talk to who represents the Jewish community in Lithuania," he said. Ambassador Cloud pointed out that there is only one elected head of the Jewish community, though there are a few small fringe elements that disagree with the stance of the national community. Valinskas and PM Kubilius both told the delegation they were confident the Seimas would deal with the restitution issue this summer.

¶13. PM Kubilius also promised quick action to permanently protect the site of the centuries-old Jewish cemetery in the Snipiskes area of Vilnius. He said he had recently chaired a meeting of government officials and experts and "it is clear what we need to do," in conjunction with international organizations that work for preservation of Jewish cemeteries.

Residency law

¶14. Speaker Valinskas assured the delegation that the Seimas would soon change a law that requires American and other non-EU workers to

live in Lithuania for two years before their family members can receive residency permits and join them.

[¶](#)15. CODEL Berkley cleared this cable.

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